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Colombian Sovereignty Under Siege

by James L. Zackrison and Eileen Bradley

Conclusions:

- Absent political and military reforms, Colombia risks either becoming a "narcostate" or disintegrating.
- Popular discontent with government policies indicates Colombia is ripe for a "dirty war."
- The FARC and ELN will continue their involvement in the drug business to increase their wealth.
- Insurgent activity will increase, especially in areas where government control is limited.
- The potential loss of democracy in Colombia threatens regional stability.

Colombia Nears Critical Juncture

Since 1966, Colombia's internal security has been disrupted by the actions of two guerrilla forces, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC) and the Ejercito de Liberaci(n Nacional (National Liberation Army, ELN). Recent attacks against the military, economy, and civilian populace are creating havoc for Colombian leaders and citizens; combat operations have averaged two encounters daily for a year. Although the guerrillas lack the military strength to topple the government, their destructiveness has the potential to destabilize Colombia's political institutions.

Colombia could, in fact, collapse as a nation. Government institutions are weak, especially in the areas occupied by the guerrillas and drug cartels. Breakdown is already occurring in several areas where government presence is negligible. Anarchy could set in if reforms to strengthen national institutions are not implemented soon, and the government might begin a "dirty war" to preempt the disintegration of Colombia.

The FARC, the largest and most powerful of Colombia's guerrilla organizations (7,700 troops), is well-armed and financed following years of kidnapping, extortion, tax collection, and involvement in the illegal drug trade. The ELN, though smaller (2,500 troops), is almost as wealthy and causes as much damage. With the collapse of Soviet and Cuban financial support, insurgent operations have been partially funded by the cocaine and heroin business, estimated to supply half of the guerrillas' annual $ .5 to 1.5 billion income.

Only a small portion of this income is used to purchase weapons and other military equipment to maintain operational and combat activities (estimated at $20 million per year). The balance is invested in land, transportation businesses, and a well-managed portfolio. This bolsters the armed forces' argument that the insurgents in Colombia are in the business for the money, not the ideology. Estimates of the insurgent's damage to Colombia's economy range as high as $1.5 billion per year (4% of the 1994 GDP). This includes the cost of damage caused by violence, direct defense (up to 3.27% of GDP), lost business, and human life [see Figure 1].

The Insurgents

Doctrine and Ideology. The FARC had its origins in the civil war-between the Liberals and Conservatives -that erupted into the episode known as La Violencia (1948-1965). Officially established in 1966, the FARC was the armed wing of the Colombian Communist Party, and still pushes a Marxist-Leninist platform of a massive redistribution of land and wealth, state control of natural resources, increased government spending on social welfare (to 50% of government expenditures), and a non-military solution (probably legalization) to the illegal drug problem. The FARC attacks the entire business sector. The more recently organized ELN follows a similar agenda, though it primarily targets the oil industry, pressuring for nationalization. The FARC has doubled its membership since 1986, and operates in over 70% of the country. ELN troop strength has remained static for several years.

Figure 1
Cost of the Insurgency to the Colombian Economy
(US $):

	1994	
Public expenditures		
Defense	592,165,000	
Petroleum	40,288,000	
Premiums	8,270,000	
Other	11,323,000	
Total public expenditures	652,046,000	
Private expenditures		
Kidnapping, robbery, extortion	260,287,000	
Petroleum sector	35,478,000	
Other	48,546,000	
Total private expenditures	344,311,000	
Lost Productivity		
Human capital	850,713,000	
Total cost (% GDP)	1,847,070,000	(3.4%)

Source: "Informe Especial: ¿Economía de guerra?" *Semana* (September 24, 1996): 48.

Leadership. Recent insurgent leadership changes have increasingly decentralized the high command's power. Front leaders now achieve influence through money, rather than ideology or combat experience, thus explaining their willingness to get involved in the drug business. The changes have resulted from the increasing power of individual front leaders, a new generation of followers less dedicated to the ideology of their elders. The requirement that fronts be self-sufficient is a major motive for the emphasis

on controlling drug producing regions and the accumulation of wealth from that business.

Structure. The two insurgencies have similar structure, consisting of a national directorate and operational "fronts." A front (up to 600 troops) is divided into columns, companies, squads, units, and teams. Individual units specialize in the drug business, extortion, assassination, kidnapping, or psychological or combat operations. These insurgencies are not rag-tag bands of brigands. Their fronts have the structure and sophistication of a modern military force.

Tactics. Tactical operations include raids on Colombian army outposts and facilities to acquire weapons, ammunition, uniforms, and communications equipment. These generally include night-time ambushes and raids-characterized by excellent intelligence collection and analysis, secret preparation, execution, quickness, and surprise. The insurgents travel on foot, capitalizing on an intimate knowledge of their areas of operation and their networks of informants.

The FARC "Bolivarian Campaign For A New Colombia"

Phase 1 (January 1990 to January 1992): Goal of 60 fronts consisting of 600 troops each, totaling 36,000, of which 18,000 will be armed. Financial requirements: $56 million.

Phase 2 (January 1992 to January 1994): Goal of 80 fronts of 450 troops each, totaling 36,000 troops.

Phase 3 (January 1994 to January 1996): The First General offensive will be launched, with 18,000 mobile guerrillas operating in the front areas and 18,000 guerrillas grouped in companies and mobile columns in the Eastern mountain chain.

Phase 4 (January 1996 to January 1998): complete the installation of a provisional government and socio-political organization.

These objectives have not been met, possibly because the leadership has diverted its attention to making money through the illegal drug business. Although 60 fronts have been established, troop strength has never topped 7,700, and the general offensive failed to topple the national government.

Source: Captured FARC documents.

The Drug Nexus

The expanding nexus between the insurgents and drug cartels is a major threat to Colombia's sovereignty. This is a marriage of convenience, as the cartels are not interested in any ideological agenda. The guerrillas justify their involvement with the cartels in terms of economic necessity, but maintain the dichotomy of repudiating capitalism while expanding their mission to greater participation in the capitalistic illegal drug business. The relationship is also based on power and control. Where the FARC is stronger (Caquet(, Guaviare, Meta, and Putumayo), the cartels pay taxes and protection money. Where the cartels predominate (C(rdoba, southern Magdalena Medio, Ariari, major urban areas), the FARC leaves the traffickers alone. Where neither has the upper hand (north Magdalena Medio, northern

Valle), a continual state of combat exists. Selective assassination of leaders or armed confrontation are frequent in these regions.

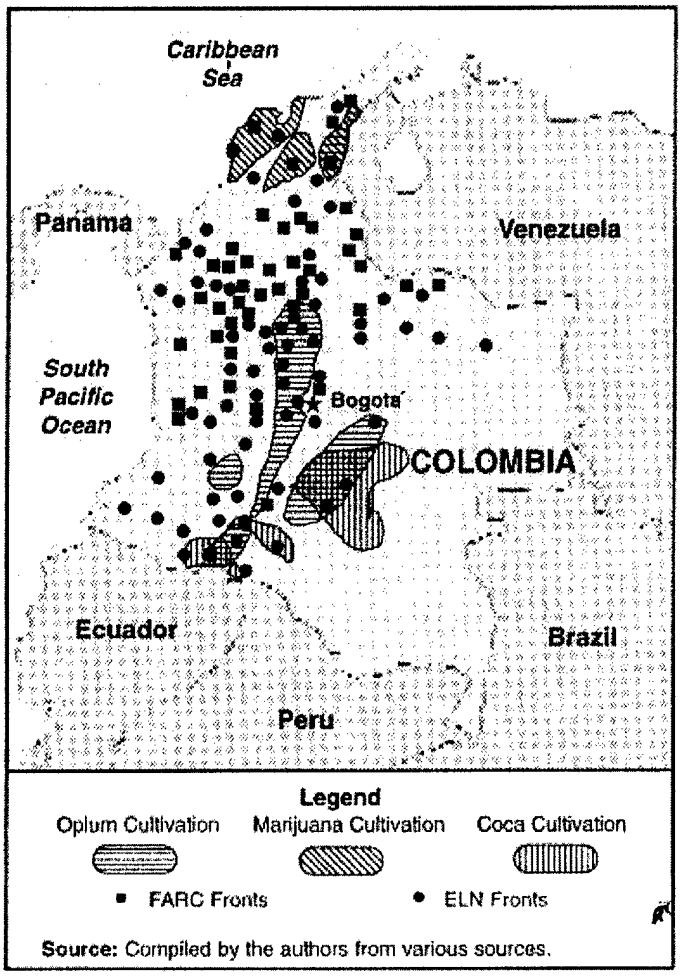
Involvement in the illegal drug business started when FARC and ELN troops were hired by the cartels to protect labs, cultivation sites, runways, or warehouses. As they do with legitimate businesses, the insurgents taxed the drug traffickers, extracting payment in money or weapons. Over the past several years the FARC and ELN have gradually entered the business, cultivating, processing, and selling marijuana, cocaine and heroin. Most sales are to Colombian middlemen, although there are reports of FARC sales to traffickers in Panama, Venezuela, Peru and Ecuador.

This nexus with the illegal drug traffickers serves as a force multiplier for the insurgents by providing income and increasing their area of operations. The instability and lawlessness created by the drug cartels provides an environment the insurgents exploit to their advantage. As the insurgents' gain control of larger geographic areas, the danger that Colombia may succumb to the weight of the insurgencies and become either a "narcostate" or a Marxist state also increases. The probability of the latter is small, but the probability of a *modus vivendi* between the insurgents and cartels to "rule from below" is increasing.

Government Efforts

Throughout the 1980s, Colombian counterinsurgency (COIN) operations established self defense groups (known as militias) to combat the insurgents. Landowners were recruited by the military to fund and staff the groups intended to protect their own land. Because a large percentage of these landowners were drug traffickers, a close connection developed between the military and the traffickers. The 1989 government declaration of war on the drug cartels started a backlash by the militias against the government. New private militias were formed, many sponsored by the FARC and ELN, increasing the insurgent's firepower and prestige. Since 1991, COIN efforts have concentrated on the court system, rather than on the battlefield. Unfortunately, this approach has thoroughly corrupted both the armed forces and the judicial system. The influence and money involved is so strong that efforts to reform the courts and armed forces might take decades.

Colombia's armed forces (146,600 strong) are ill- prepared to fight counter-insurgency operations. Former Minister of Defense Juan Carlos Esguerra acknowledges that the Army lacks the training and intelligence capability to effectively perform COIN operations. The isolation of military outposts primarily manned by poorly-trained conscripts, the dangerous lawlessness generated by the insurgents and drug traffickers, and the lack of political will throughout the government, all adversely impact morale.



President Ernesto Samper proposed a security budget increase of $2.8 billion in 1997 (to almost 10% of central government expenditures). Additionally, affluent Colombians will be compelled to purchase war bonds to raise $421 million specifically for police and military operations. Unfortunately, the capital investment budget has been cut drastically, threatening the entire project. Force structure improvements include the creation of a third mobile brigade (3,500 new troops), acquisition of logistics equipment (completed MI-17 HIP and Blackhawk helicopter purchases), communications gear, and night vision devices. Such planning is a start, but past COIN efforts have demonstrated that only prolonged sustained operations are successful in eradicating the insurgents. Changes in strategy, away from traditional defensive operations based on stationing troops in garrisons, are also needed. Offensive operations are required to push the FARC out of its normal operating areas to remove the advantage of fighting on known terrain.

The increasing cost of the insurgencies (in both money and lives) is slowly solidifying public sentiment in favor of a military resolution. Consensus is forming around the idea of an increasingly centralized management of the conflict. Proposed solutions involve the following:

- changing the legal structure for apprehension and prosecution of insurgents so the armed forces can arrest guerrillas for prosecution

- putting the economy on a war footing

- increasing capital investment in COIN materiel
- developing a strategic plan to reorganize the military and deploy outside of its current garrisons;
- implementing legislation to protect the military and police from constant charges of human rights violations during periods of extra-constitutional rule.

Unfortunately, few observers expect these proposals to be implemented. Not surprisingly, there is talk that the country is ripe for a "dirty war" to eliminate the insurgents and their supporters. This will result in the suspension of most civil liberties, increasing military impunity and human rights abuses.

Outlook

Insurgency will continue past the turn of the century, given Colombia's current military capabilities and political climate. The insurgents are weakening the government's resolve through the traditional channels of personal corruption so inherent in Colombia's political system. Escalating urbanization, population growth, and a lack of government reform all contribute to changing the balance of power in Colombia, as well as the nature of the insurgency. Increasing wealth from the drug business guarantees the FARC and ELN access to advanced technology, matching or surpassing that of the military. This, in turn, increases the insurgent's power and control over larger areas of Colombia.

The FARC and ELN have begun to emphasize their involvement in the drug business instead of developing a military strategy or capability to overthrow the government. Insurgents, who once declared their intent to put an end to capitalism, are now adopting capitalist methods for survival and growth. As the government's control over national territory decreases, national armed forces leaders realize that they cannot adequately meet the combined threat from the insurgents and drug traffickers. The ideological guerrillas are becoming bandits wealthy enough to threaten the democratic governing institutions of Colombia.

A loss of Colombian democracy will threaten regional stability by intensifying the environment of lawlessness and anarchy that helps the flow of drugs and corruption from and through Colombia toward the United States. A narcostate would complicate the maintenance of counterdrug operations in the region. The fragmentation of Colombia into small, anarchic regions with no credible government would damage the region's economy and stability, foster insurgency in neighboring countries, and might require U.S. intervention.

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